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ABSTRACT

This article, the second in a series of AAHE research reports, summarizes research on college and university departments in relation to their environment, performance and leadership. Several assumptions about the nature of departments are questioned, and trends are examined in departmental environmental, future sources of tension, potential changes, and implications for departmental structures and administration. (Author/AF)

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The Organization of Departments *by Marvin W. Peterson*

This article is the second in a series of AAHE research reports made possible by a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The goal of the series is to summarize the thrust of current research on selected topics and to speculate on what this research implies for future practice.

The format aims at a combination of easy readability and adequate documentation. Thus textual references are cited at the end. Questions concerning the article—sources, data, and the like—should go to the author, Marvin W. Peterson, Assistant Professor of Higher Education, Center for the Study of Higher Education, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104.

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This review focuses on college and university departments in relation to their environment, their performance, and their leadership. The analysis questions several assumptions about the nature of departments and discusses trends in the departmental environment, future sources of tension, potential changes, and implications for departmental structures and administration. No attempt has been made to review the work on disciplinary differences or "cultures" that distinguish faculty, students, and knowledge patterns by academic field, although a study along such lines would be a valuable addition to understanding higher education.

Myths or Realities?

As the basic organizational unit in most colleges and universities, the department is the setting in which faculty members pursue disciplinary and professional interests and at the same time perform most of the basic teaching, research, and service activities which are the functions that colleges and universities to varying degrees reward and encourage. That these two roles of the department are often in conflict is both common knowledge and the basis for a substantial body of literature in which the department is championed or maligned, applauded as the organizational shield for the independence and freedom of faculty members or scorned as a bastion of inflexibility and elitism. In short, it is a continual focus of controversy.

HE 002 448

The controversy is seemingly resolved by answering three basic questions:

1. What is the formal and informal organization of the department?
2. What are the effects of a department on the functioning of a college or university and the development of a discipline?
3. Is the department more or less effective than other structures that have been proposed or implemented?

Not surprisingly, the limited research on departments is not directed to the second and third questions and focuses only inadequately on the first. However, existing research does shed light on some of the basic concepts about which departmental proponents and opponents seem to disagree, namely, that departments are autonomous units not subject to external influence, that a department's internal organization does not affect its performance as a unit, and that departmental leadership is either inconsequential or unnecessary.

The Nature of Departments

Variation rather than consistency is the rule in describing departments. They are found in all types of institutions and in every discipline. They attract students and faculty who often differ in basic characteristics and orientation. [32] Within a given discipline or college, departments vary in terms of goals, decision-making procedures, formal and informal organizational patterns, and effectiveness. [11, 13] Indeed the validity of attempting to study a department as an organizational system would be questionable were it not for two facts: first, the limited research suggests some interesting relationships and continuities; and second, despite all the discussion of curricular innovation, interdepartmental approaches, and new structures (divisions, centers, institutes, etc.), the department over the past five to ten years has continued to be the basic academic home for faculty members, the focal point for curricular development, and the source of much of the scholarly work done in colleges and universities. [14, 23]

Autonomy: The Impact of Environment

Any organizational system, such as a department, is subject to external influences that potentially can affect its structure and performance. Departments are affected by influences from two major environments: one is inside the university and the other outside.

The extent to which a department has control over decisions affecting it depends primarily on its relationship with the university environment or, more specifically, the central administration. As colleges and universities become larger or more prestigious, departments seem to have greater con-

trol over such matters as curricula, personnel, internal allocation of funds, and space. [9, 21] In fact, in the large prestigious university the department may have almost total control over decisions in these areas. [13, 34] The administrative style of an institution may affect the degree of departmental decentralization also, but whether the institution is public or private appears to make little difference. [19] On the other hand, decisions regarding the *total* allocation of funds to a department appears to be almost always beyond any direct departmental control.

Regardless of its decision-making autonomy, there is substantial evidence that a department's effectiveness and internal structure are a result of other university influences. For instance, departmental quality appears to be related to the existence in the university of other strong departments and substantial library and financial resources. [8] Also, a department's goals in teaching, research, and service, and its involvement in interdepartmental activity even in a decentralized institution, seem to bear some relation to the institution's goals and priorities. [13, 34]

The extent to which a department is influenced by the environment outside the university is unclear, but some dimensions are discernible. Departments subjected to more turbulent environments—that is, those characterized by a more rapidly changing knowledge, greater demands for service, greater turnover of students, or greater diversity of students and faculty—are likely to formalize their decision-making process and evolve planning activities. [13, 22, 34] Departments in larger and more complex disciplinary fields are more likely to form departmental subunits which need coordination [34], while some of the career-oriented fields seem more prone to bureaucratic patterns of decision making. [13]

Thus, it appears that while departments may have substantial decision-making autonomy, they are still heavily influenced by external factors. Pure departmental autonomy is essentially a myth.

Departmental Organization: Does It Matter?

As with other organizations, the success of a department depends largely on its capacity to achieve productive goals, maintain staff, secure resources, establish effective decision-making procedures, and plan for or cope with external constraints and opportunities. One way of measuring the impact of formal and informal patterns of organization is to see how they affect the performance of these functions.

There is little evidence that organizational patterns are related to any objective measures of faculty teaching or scholarly productivity (publications, student credit-hour production, etc.). These are rather the result of financial resources, departmental prestige, and leadership. However, departments with a strong emphasis on undergraduate teaching rather than basic research are typified by a pattern of faculty orientation that includes greater cohesiveness, faculty identity with college or university rather than departmental or disciplinary concerns, a more bureaucratic decision-making pattern, and a more complex structure. [13, 34] The formalization of decision making and the reputation for being well administered is positively related to departmental prestige. Thus, success is not just the result of ad hoc decision making. [22, 24] There is also greater potential for bringing about changes in student attitudes in departments with high levels of interest in students and student-faculty interaction. [44]

Factors affecting the morale, satisfaction, and development of faculty and staff are relatively unstudied at the department level. While collegial decision making appears to yield greater faculty satisfaction with their department, there are substantial indications that desire for faculty involvement exceeds the willingness to be involved. [15, 18, 42] Interestingly, the degree of formalization of departmental decision making does not appear to affect faculty satisfaction. [22]

A department's capacity to secure resources—new faculty members, funds, or new students—seems to be enhanced by increased formalization of these activities. [2, 17, 22] In addition, departments which are successful in securing funds from sources outside the university are also successful in securing them from sources within the university. [13, 34] Thus, successful departments seem to be able to translate their formalized expertise in resource procurement from one setting to another.

Effective decision making is not limited to any single committee system, pattern of representation, or decision-making structure. However, effective departments, as noted earlier, do tend to formalize decisions to a greater extent than less effective departments. It should be noted that formalization by a department may mean little more than regularizing the activity, assigning responsibility for overseeing it to some person or group, or possibly establishing some guidelines or policies. Thus, formalization is not related to the extent of participation in decision making and appears not to affect faculty satisfaction with their department. [22] More importantly, given a department's propensity for ad hoc decision making, there is evidence that advance preparation may improve decision-making effectiveness. [5]

The area to which departments seem to give the least attention is "adaptive activities"—planning, environmental analysis, innovation, and experimentation. [34, 42] This is particularly interesting in view of the attention given aspects of adaptation elsewhere in higher education. [14, 19, 23, 26]

In summary, there is evidence of limited scope that faculty consensual patterns, formalized procedures, and more democratic decision making do effect departmental performance. Departmental organization and perhaps the lack of organized concern for adaptive activities account for many of the criticisms of departments.

Departmental Leadership: Inconsequential?

Because of the impact of environmental influences and the relative importance of departmental organization, the department chairmen's role is anything but inconsequential. Studies show there are no less than 10 and as many as 46 areas in which faculty and administrators expect him to play some role. [1, 10, 30, 40, 42] Despite the extensive expectations, he often carries a substantial teaching load, is given no extra pay, and is not permanent. [3, 28] Furthermore, high-level administrators differ from faculty in the role they expect from chairmen, thus creating a classic "man-in-the-middle" conflict. [40, 42] Not surprisingly, the chairmen in lower-prestige institutions have expectations more like administrators and those in higher-prestige ones more like faculty. [31, 40, 42] One further complication:

there is a tendency for faculty to ascribe most power or sanctions to the chairmen in those areas which they view least important. [11] Thus, the chairman is expected to be omniscient, omnicompetent, omnipresent, and humble.

Chairmen who are active and initiate action are found in departments that seem to be successful and well administered. [13, 24] Although most chairmen are viewed by faculty as less powerful than higher-level administrators and no more so than the faculty themselves [19, 25], their use of power and influence enhances faculty job satisfaction, loyalty to the college, and perception of productivity (not objective measures). [4, 11, 25] This seems to be accomplished by relying on expertise and interpersonal relations rather than utilizing sanctions, punishment, or policy solutions. [4] Finally, there is growing evidence that a chairman who adopts an administrative style which is personally supportive, fosters communication, involves as many as possible in decision making, and relies on expertise, as opposed to one who uses bureaucratic techniques, creates an atmosphere of greater consensus, satisfaction, and loyalty among his faculty. [4, 18, 42]

Departmental leadership then, is one of the most distinctive factors about effective departments.

The New Reality: Some Implications

As an organizational unit, the department has been relatively stable. This fact, combined with the department's limited concern for adaptability and certain trends in the university environment, is likely to create substantial tensions or changes in the organizational nature of departments.

Management Information Systems

The rapid growth of computer-based management information systems accelerated by current financial pressures will not only make available new decision-making techniques, but also will increase the amount and detail of information on operations and performance at the departmental level. [20, 27, 39] This poses an opportunity for department chairmen and faculty who are ready to use the techniques to improve their decision making. However, for those who are not willing or prepared to utilize it, it also provides an excuse for centralizing or routinizing departmental decision making.

Organized Faculty

The increasing tendency for faculty to form bargaining units in four-year as well as two-year institutions [37] is likely to change departmental life along two lines. First, it could transfer a number of departmental decisions on salary, promotion, teaching assignments, and workload to the bargaining process with the probable loss of flexibility as these matters come under formal contractual agreements. Second, a dilemma typically arises over whether the department chairman becomes totally an administrative representative and loses his faculty leadership base or returns to the faculty with less influence with the central administration than he now has. (For a more complete discussion see Blackburn's "Research Report No. 1.")

Interdisciplinary Structures

The limited but steady growth of new interdisciplinary research and teaching programs fostered by the complex problems universities are attempting to resolve, by student and public demands, and by the increasing complexity of knowledge places stresses on departments. Joint programs require more complex departmental mechanisms for coordinating them [13, 34] and are likely to be more ephemeral. The lack of departmental mechanisms for adaptation may make it difficult for departments to identify and assess such opportunities.

Student Participation

The literature on departments to date essentially views them as faculty organizations through which students pass or are processed. Yet student demands for participation have shifted to academic concerns and a realization that at many institutions these will be resolved in the departments. How students will be integrated into the departmental decision-making apparatus and with what impact for both students and faculty is as yet unclear. [38] The restructuring which their participation requires will not only create problems in design of decision-making structures but generate conflict with which the chairman will have to deal.

Rotation of Chairmanship

The trend toward rotating the chairmanship is often discussed but its effect is unclear. At least one author suggests it assists academic reform. [23] Yet in light of the nature of the department and the potential impacts of the new realities, two implications are clear. First, chairmen need to serve a substantial period of time to be effective in the increasingly complex departmental milieu. In large departments this might even include a year's apprenticeship as an associate chairman before assuming the chairmanship. Second, the shorter tenure of rotating chairmen and the increasingly complex nature of the office suggest more than ever the need for faculty to take the selection of new chairmen seriously and the need to institute the often suggested bromide, a training program.

Conclusion

It appears that the beliefs regarding departmental autonomy, the unimportance of internal organization, and the inconsequential nature of departmental leadership are more myth than reality. This perspective and the trends that were identified suggest that the internal organizational pattern of departments will become more complex, that more individuals will be involved in departmental activities, and that, unless there is departmental initiative, more decisions will be controlled by the central administration. Thus, colleges and universities must give greater attention to devising effective department-level governance systems and greater concern to the selection and preparation of departmental chairmen. Alternatives to the departmental structure need to be evaluated and their impact on students, faculty, and the institution compared with the impact of departments.

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